

# Tuscola proves too much for Carrollton as Hawks fall in quarterfinals

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November 12 2017 1:27 AM



TUSCOLA - With all the big pass plays and the late come from behind victories the Carrollton Hawks have pulled off this season, they always had an extra gear. Coming into the Class 1A quarterfinals, they needed to double, maybe triple that gear. Like Qui-Gon stated, "there's always a bigger fish,"

That bigger fish came in the form of the Tuscola Warriors regarding enrollment and physical size.

Tuscola soundly defeated Carrollton 48-20 in Tuscola on a cold, sunny Saturday afternoon.

The Warriors (12-0) will travel to play at Athens next Saturday at 2 p.m. in the semifinals.

Carrollton's season ends at 10-2.

"These guys are physical up front. I think that was the difference today in the trenches," Carrollton head coach Nick Flowers said. "They got good height and size. They're a good football team and do it right up here and continue to."

A year and one week ago the Warriors walked off Carrollton's field with a 55-28 victory in the second round, and the Hawks were in for revenge yesterday. A win over Tuscola at their place would've been oh so sweet, and things were looking like it in the early going.

Carrollton won the coin toss, elected to receive, and drove downfield quickly, including a 32-yard scramble by quarterback Hunter Flowers. Moments later, on a fourth and goal from the four-yard line, Flowers connected with Nathan Walker for a touchdown with 9:09 left in the first quarter.

"What a way to do it. The opening drive of the game, take it down, punch it in and that's the way you want to start a ballgame off," Flowers said."

It had the makings of being a competitive game.

However, Tuscola would make sure that would not happen, especially considering what happened to them last year against Calhoun when they lost 28-27, which shocked Tuscola and the state of Illinois.

Warriors head coach Andy Romine's record since he took the job in 2015 is now 33-2, but he's never taken any playoff games for granted, definitely after last year.

"Let's face it last year's loss was crushing; it was crushing. You're hurt for our kids and hurt for our seniors," Romine said. "These things are hard to win, they really are. This is the second time it's been since these were freshmen we got back to the semis. A lot of programs haven't been there twice in their history. They're hard to get to, and it's hard to win playoff games in general."

"It's a grind and takes a ton of focus from kids. We're just really proud of our kids to keep playing, and it's 100 percent of their credit for how hard they've worked and bought in."

On the ensuing drive, the Warriors marched 59 yards on 11 plays and scored on a four-yard Dalton Hoel touchdown run that was also on fourth down. The extra point by Cade Kresin made it 7-6 Tuscola. Carrollton went three-and-out on their next possession and the snap to Byron Holmes, who was back to punt, sailed over his head. He managed to pick the ball up and punt it to the Hawks twenty-yard line.

Tuscola wasted no time.

Quarterback, Luke Sluder found Hoel in the end zone for a one-yard score that gave the Warriors a 13-6 lead, and it would only get worse for the Hawks, despite some opportunities.

On the following Tuscola drive the Warriors seemed as though they would grab a two-score lead as they were in the red zone, but on a quarterback keeper by Sluder, the Hawks forced a fumble and Flowers recovered it in the end zone. Carrollton got the break they needed, but nothing came of it as the Hawks went three and out again. Sluder would make up for the fumble and scampered for a 28-yard touchdown run on the very next play to make it 20-6 Tuscola midway through the second quarter.

The Hawks forced Sluder into another fumble, which Flowers recovered but once again Tuscola's defense picked up their offense and Carrollton came up empty.

"We lost the field position battle right out of the gate. We gave them a short field on a botched snap, and it led to their second score. The field position was lost early in that first half," Flowers said. "They had two fumbles, and we didn't get anything off either of them. Whenever turned the ball over they pinned their ears back defensively and brought that much more on us."

With time winding down in the first half, Tuscola drove downfield, and Sluder connected with Hoel once again, and the senior wide receiver caught his second touchdown pass of the game on a 28-yard score with 41.7 to go. That gave the Warriors a 27-6 lead going into the locker room.

“We moved the ball every time we had it, but we also put them in a couple of bad situations where we would turn the ball over. Our kids on the side of the ball did a good job and got off the field when we needed to after turnovers,” Romine said. “How you respond to momentum swings against you and adversity says a lot about you as a player and a football program, and our kids did a good job responding to it.”

After turning Tuscola over on downs to start the third quarter, Flowers threw a pass that was deflected and picked off by Kresin for a 20-yard touchdown return to put them in the driver's seat at 34-6.

If that didn't sum up Carrollton's day, then this would.

On the ensuing possession, Flowers lobbed a deep pass down the sideline to Walker, the type of pass the two had been money on all season. Walker out jumped Noah Pierce and appeared to have come down with the football, but as Walker landed, he bobbled the ball and it bounced into Pierce's hands for an interception as he was also falling.

Despite that interception, coach Flowers was impressed with Tuscola's defense, especially their overall length, which made it difficult for his quarterback and the receivers to gel.

“They didn't bring quite as much pressure as we thought they would, but their height really got in our throwing windows. We hadn't seen that kind of height all year long. I don't know where they get this height from over here,” Flowers jokingly said. However, Carrollton would get a couple more scores to go out with pride.



After a 47-yard catch and run by Tyler Barnett, Holmes scored his 16th and final rushing touchdown of the season, which brought the score to 34-12.

Dalton Hoel scored his fourth touchdown and third catch of the day on a 41-yard pass from Sluder early in the fourth quarter.

With 9.6 to go and facing Tuscola's JV defense, the Hawks scored their last touchdown of the season on an 11-yard pass from Flowers to Alex Bowker, which is fitting given Bowker is a senior and enjoyed a marvelous career as a three-year starter.

The majority of the senior players were three-year starters as well and were thrown into the fire in 2015 after the Hawks graduated 15 seniors from their state runner-up team in 2014. An immediate drop-off was expected, but they persevered, led Carrollton to two quarterfinals and a second round finish, including two WIVC South championships. Coach Flowers will remember these group of men from this year by being quality teammates to the underclassmen and showing tremendous leadership.

"I want to commend these seniors for being good mentors for our younger classmen on how to be a good teammate. These seniors were great teammates to the younger guys and taught them a lot about the program. They taught them how to win and how to work

for it,” Flowers said “We felt like every week we came together as a team, and I think that says a lot about this group of seniors. They hung in there together every week and got better.”

Looking ahead, the future is oozing with promise for Carrollton as Hunter Flowers, Holmes, and Walker all return on offense, and all three were highly productive this season. Several starters will be back as well. One thing for sure is that expectations will be sky high in Carrollton once again come 2018.

“We just got to have a good off-season, and we’ll be back without a doubt,” Flowers said. “We feel we’ll be back in this same position next year. That’s our only expectation.”